



MENTORING FOR YOUTH WITH BACKGROUNDS OF INVOLVEMENT IN COMMERCIAL SEX ACTIVITY

National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review

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SUMMARY

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This review examines research on mentoring for youth with backgrounds of involvement (or high-risk for involvement) in commercial sex activity (YCSA). The review is organized around four questions:

1. What is the documented effectiveness of mentoring for YCSA?
2. What factors condition or shape the effectiveness of mentoring for YCSA?
3. What are the intervening processes that are most important in linking mentoring to outcomes for YCSA?
4. To what extent have efforts to provide mentoring to YCSA reached and engaged targeted youth, been implemented with high quality, and been adopted and sustained by host organizations and settings?

Research directly addressing mentoring for youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement is extremely limited in scope and largely insufficient for answering any of the above questions. However, when these findings are considered in combination with other available research (for example, qualitative studies of the experiences of youth who have been involved with commercial sex exploitation and survey research eliciting the observations and recommendations of professionals who work with such young persons), it is possible to identify a number of noteworthy possibilities that merit consideration. These include:

- A potential for both formal and informal forms of mentoring to be of benefit for YCSA

- The possibility that benefits of mentoring for YCSA may be conditional upon mentors having appropriate training and/or histories of commercial sex exploitation involvement themselves
- A potential for processes involving hope, identity, social support, and education and career development to be instrumental as pathways through which mentoring is able to benefit YCSA
- Although it appears viable to engage YCSA in mentoring supports and services, it may prove difficult to sustain their involvement over time due to high levels of flux and instability in the life circumstances of youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement.

Direct research on mentoring for YCSA, however, is scarce and of insufficient scope or quality to offer a basis for even preliminary evidence-informed conclusions. This limitation notwithstanding, the review concludes with insights and recommendations for practice based on currently available knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is increasingly recognized as a significant societal and public health concern within the U.S. as well as globally. As a population, young persons involved in commercial sex activity (YCSA) are markedly more susceptible to a wide range of serious and potentially life-threatening negative health outcomes and experiences. These include suicide and other forms of self-harm, substance use, mental health difficulties (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder), sexually transmitted infections (e.g., HIV), and several different types of victimization (e.g., rape, physical and psychological abuse).¹⁻⁴ The extent to which such problems can be directly attributed to involvement in commercial sexual activity remains to be clarified, as there are often a variety of factors affecting YCSA, although as expected, available research does point to a number of ways in which involvement in commercial sex itself can be harmful to young people.⁵ Furthermore, even in the absence of an established causative link between involvement in commercial sex activity and increased adjustment difficulties, there is obvious value in prevention efforts focused on reducing the numbers of youth who fall into this group. It is also clear that those who do become involved in commercial sex activity often will be in need of an array of effective and well-coordinated services and supports (more systemic or “upstream” efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, such as those focused on demand reduction and law enforcement, are also vitally important,⁵ but are not the focus of this review). Mentoring has been frequently cited as one strategy that may be helpful in supporting prevention and intervention goals for YCSA⁵ and is the focus of this review. The specific questions addressed are as follows:

- What is the demonstrated effectiveness of mentoring for youth with current or past involvement in (or at high risk for involvement in) commercial sex activity (YCSA)?
- In what ways are the benefits of mentoring for YCSA likely to differ as a function of such considerations as the backgrounds and characteristics of the youth involved and the types of program practices being employed?

- What intervening pathways or variables are likely to be most important in linking mentoring to outcomes for YCSA?
- To what extent have efforts to provide mentoring to YCSA reached and engaged targeted youth, been implemented with high quality, and been adopted and sustained by host organizations and settings? What factors predict better reach, implementation, and adoption/sustainability?

YCSA are young persons who have current or past involvement in (or at high risk for involvement in) commercial sex activity. For the purposes of this review, commercial sex activity is defined broadly as follows: “[A]ny form of being sexual (or the idea of being sexual) in exchange for money, gifts, safety, drugs [. . .] or survival needs like housing, food, clothes, or immigration and documentation – whether [the young person involved] gets to keep the money/goods/service or someone else profits from these acts.” (p. 7).⁶ A variety of other terms associated with youth involvement in commercial sex activity also have been used in the scholarly literature and in advocacy discourse (i.e., sexual exploitation of children, commercial sexual exploitation of children, domestic minor sex trafficking, child/juvenile prostitution, and survival sex). In this review, we use the term YCSA in an effort to eliminate potential value judgments regarding youth involvement in commercial sex activity and to avoid language that is potentially stigmatizing or paternalizing such as could be the case with terms that emphasize concepts of “victimization,” “exploitation,” or “criminality.” At the same time, we recognize that our choice of terminology has its own potential limitations. Eschewing the term “exploitation”, for example, runs the risk of calling attention away from the blatant forms of maltreatment and abuse that are routinely experienced by youth involved in commercial sex activity as well as the more subtle, but no less significant and exploitive forms of manipulation and psychological coercion to which such youth are frequently subjected. As one final note on this issue, in describing the results of specific studies we have elected to utilize terminology of the study authors wherever feasible so as to be consistent with the original source material.

This review considers mentoring to be relationships and activities that take place between youth (i.e., mentees) and older or more experienced persons (i.e., mentors) who are acting in a non-professional helping capacity – whether through a program or more informally -- to provide support that benefits one or more areas of the young person’s development (for further detail, see [What is Mentoring?](#)). This definition excludes services and supports that are offered in formal professional roles by those with advanced education or training (e.g., social work, counseling). However, for purposes of the present review, we have relaxed this requirement to some degree out of necessity in view of the limited amount of available research. Such allowances when made are noted.

A systematic literature search for research that has examined mentoring for YCSA as defined above was carried out to identify articles, book chapters, and evaluation reports that have reported findings pertinent to one or more of the central questions for this review. The review of available research for each question begins with a background section. These sections are intended to help frame the question and to orient the reader to findings of related research (e.g., benefits of mentoring for other populations of youth faced with high levels of adversity or life challenge).

1. What is the Effectiveness of Mentoring for Youth with Backgrounds of Involvement in Commercial Sex Activity (YCSA)?

BACKGROUND

There are a number of reasons to expect that mentoring can be a beneficial form of support for YCSA. As a group, these youth are more likely to have experienced difficulties at home, including maltreatment, and to have run away from home.⁷⁻⁹ Research indicates, moreover, that for a substantial percentage, a parent/guardian or other family member (e.g., older sibling) will have served as the young person's primary portal into commercial sex activity.¹⁰⁻¹¹ These troubling realities point to a need for YCSA to experience compensatory and, hopefully, reparative relationships with caring adult support figures outside of their immediate families. YCSA also have been found to report significant challenges with accessing support from family members or friends while involved in or attempting to exit from commercial sex activity. This may be the case for a variety of reasons, ranging from control exerted by adult exploiters to judgmental responses from loved ones.¹² Such considerations suggest that mentoring relationships may be able to prove helpful by offering a reliable source of support for YCSA while others are least temporarily effectively "off line." Not to be overlooked, furthermore, is the potential for YCSA to have formed strong attachments to those directly involved in their exploitation or victimization (e.g., older "boyfriends", pimps). The YCSA literature suggests that such attachments may stem from immature and romanticized feelings of love that are stoked by sophisticated grooming processes of exploiters. In other cases, victimization may give rise to complex forms of psychological dependence and identification with those responsible, a phenomenon that has been variously referenced under terms such as "Stockholm syndrome" or "trauma bonds" and is associated with a variety of violent contexts, including child sexual abuse, human trafficking, and intimate partner violence.¹³ Theoretically, a close and meaningful bond established with a mentor that is free of such unhealthy dynamics could prove instrumental as a valuable counterpoint for YCSA as they work through what may be quite complicated and deep-rooted feelings toward persons who have the potential to serve as powerful sources of attraction for continued or renewed involvement in high-risk behaviors.

In line with these considerations, the potential benefits of mentoring are a recurring theme in studies that have solicited the perspectives and recommendations of professionals who support YCSA, as well as YCSA themselves.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Illustratively, in a survey of agencies and organizations serving male minors at-risk for commercial sexual exploitation, mentoring services were frequently cited as an effective "relational" strategy for engaging such youth in preventative care.¹⁵ Likewise, in a study that examined survey data from 37 minor females who had been subjected to sex trafficking, it was found that their top reported need while being trafficked was "help to escape tied with the need for mentoring or support (someone whom they could trust)" (p. 170).¹⁶

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At the same time, other considerations point to potential constraints on the effectiveness of mentoring for YCSA. Mentors charged with offering support to YCSA, by definition, are unlikely to have received advanced training in a helping profession (e.g., social work). As such, they may find the multi-faceted needs that are typical of this population of youth to be quite daunting. Feelings of being overwhelmed and doubts as to whether they are making a meaningful difference may make such mentors less likely to stay the course.ⁱ Such feelings may reduce the potential for beneficial long-term bonds to be established and, importantly, also increase the risk for premature relationship endings that intensify feelings of distrust or abandonment and thus are measurably harmful.¹⁸ The instability that often characterizes the lives of YCSA may represent a further formidable obstacle to sustained relationships with mentors. A qualitative study of interviews conducted with 24 girls between the ages of 14 and 19, all of whom were identified as having experienced commercial sexual exploitation prior to age 18, found that although a number of girls could identify potential adult support figures, they often lacked access to them due to having moved repeatedly across different multiple jurisdictions, states, and regions.¹⁹ Similar challenges to these have been identified for other populations of high-need youth (e.g., those in foster care²⁰) and may help to account for a trend toward reduced (although still positive) effects for mentoring programs directed toward youth experiencing high levels of both individual and environmental risk.²¹

A recent systematic review identified 13 studies of programs or policies intended to address commercial sexual victimization or exploitation of young persons.²² Findings suggestive of favorable outcomes for participating youth were reported in several of the studies. The rigor of the evaluations was generally quite low, however, due in particular to small sample sizes and design limitations. None of the evaluations, for example, included a well-matched comparison group against which outcomes for those receiving the intervention could be benchmarked, leaving open the possibility that improvements observed were attributable instead to other factors (e.g., the process of exiting from commercial sex activity more generally).ⁱⁱ These limitations notwithstanding, several studies (discussed below) have nonetheless reported findings that are arguably informative with respect to the potential for mentoring to be of benefit to YCSA.

RESEARCH

The identified studies have reported findings that are relevant to understanding the potential implications of both formal and more informal, naturally-occurring forms of mentoring for YCSA.

Formal mentoring: In one evaluation with findings most relevant to formalized mentoring, researchers examined pre-post changes in outcomes for a sample of 32 participants in a community-based program for minor-age girls who had experienced or were at-risk for commercial sex exploitation.²⁴ Although the program included a diverse continuum of programs and activities, the relationship that each girl established with her assigned case manager was clearly of central importance. The following description of the case manager's role, derived from a formative

i In support of this possibility, one recent evaluation found that mentors of youth deemed to be high on levels of both individual and environmental risk were significantly more likely to identify the youth's needs being too severe as a reason for relationship termination.¹⁷

ii Another recent review similarly reported a lack of evidence to reliably gauge the effectiveness of interventions to combat commercial sex exploitation.²³

component of the evaluation, is telling in this regard:

“Case management was described as a one-on-one process, highly tailored to individual need. Typically case managers meet with clients for between 2 and 4 hours each week. Personal interaction and trust is key; case managers meet their clients where they are and ‘do whatever it takes to get the job done,’ including providing transportation and other supportive services. Consequently, the personal bond may become so strong that the LIFESKILLS program is often known to clients by their case manager—it is ‘Cece’s program.’ Case managers essentially are available (within limitations) at all times, including weekends. They are ‘with them [clients] in their life.’ Case managers are like ‘parents, partners, mentors, and older sisters,’ providing advice, access to services, monitoring of behavior, and some outings, including shopping and outdoor trips. Another important function of case managers is to model basic behaviors ‘that clients have never seen,’ including appropriate ways of talking to employees in a store, and how to positively negotiate numerous life situations.” (p. 3-3)²⁴

Significant changes were observed for participating girls from baseline to 3-month follow-up in several areas. These included self-reported decreases in experiences of sexual assault and positive beliefs about commercial sex and increases in educational aspirations, self-efficacy, and employment attitudes. Change was not observed for other outcomes, including arrests (assessed by official records) or reported levels of commercial sex involvement (which was low at baseline), drug use, or commitment to school. As the support provided by staff in this program was in the context of a professional role relationship, it could be technically regarded as outside the scope of mentoring as defined for purposes of the present review. It is noteworthy in this regard, however, that most staff were themselves “survivors” of commercial sex exploitation and thus may well have been drawing on personal experience as much as any professional training they had received to inform their relational work with girls in this program (peer mentoring from survivors of commercial sex exploitation is considered further in the next section of this review).

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Findings included significant improvements on measures of **positive future orientation**, **intentional self-regulation**, and some domains of **positive self-perception**, including **global self-worth** and **job competence**.

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In another notable study, pre-post change on outcomes was examined for 10 youth (ages 13 to 17) impacted by domestic minor sex trafficking who completed an 11-week “positive youth development-oriented mentoring intervention.”²⁵ The aim of the intervention, as described by the study author, was to create “a positive developmental context (the mentoring relationship), which encouraged participants in the development of positive identity (positive self-perception) and allowed them to more effectively move toward a positive future (intentional self-regulation; future orientation)” (p. 31).²⁵ The intervention was implemented in the context of one-to-one meetings with a clinician at a residential facility. Content was derived primarily from the Thrive Foundation for Youth’s Thriving Conversation and Project GPS (Goal Selection, Pursuit of Strategies, and Shifting Gears) goal setting tools. Creative activities and rapport-building exercises intended to encourage trust and engagement were also included. Findings included significant improvements on measures of positive future orientation, intentional self-regulation, and some domains of positive self-perception, including global self-worth and job competence. It should be noted that because the

intervention as evaluated was implemented by a clinician (and thus most likely a professional with advanced training in a helping profession), it likely would not qualify as mentoring as defined for this review. However, in principle, the intervention could be implemented by non-clinicians (e.g., well-trained volunteers or para-professionals) and thus has been included in the scope of the current review.

Natural mentoring: Other research has looked at the potential implications of more naturally-occurring forms of mentoring for youth at-risk for involvement in commercial sex activity. In an investigation of 184 street-involved youth that was informed by findings from the natural mentoring literature, researchers hypothesized that those with stable housing that included adult supervision would be associated with a lower risk of sexually-transmitted disease (STD) and related risk behaviors, relative to those with stable housing that did not include adult supervision.²⁶ Findings failed to support this prediction, leading the study authors to conclude that more intensive, multi-modal interventions may be necessary to address the sexual health risks of street-involved youth and that future research should qualitatively explore how adult supervision is experienced by this population of youth to help inform the design of such interventions.

In other research relevant to the potential benefits of natural mentoring for YCSA, investigators recently examined pre-post changes for 23 runaway, homeless, and street youth (ages 14-21 and 56% female) who received a 10 week psychoeducational group intervention over a 3 month period.²⁷ All youth were reported to be at-risk for and/or subjugated to abusive and/or exploitive relationships, including those involved with domestic minor sex trafficking. Several weeks of the program were focused on helping the youth to build and sustain healthy relationships. One session, for example, helped to familiarize the youth with internal and external boundaries with self and others within healthy relationships, with a subsequent session then building on this information by having the youth observe and practice ways of setting the stage for healthy relationships with family, peers, and intimate partners. Findings revealed a substantial (although not statistically significant) increase in participating youth's reported levels of self-esteem. The researchers also reported that "the majority of youth (70%) demonstrated that the group had taught them skills which would assist them in the development of healthier relationships with themselves, peers, family members, and dating partners" (p. 533).²⁷ This intervention did not apparently focus on building healthy relationships with potential mentor figures in the lives of the youth. The content of the sessions, however, would seemingly be relatively easily expanded to incorporate information and skill-building in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Mentoring is a theoretically promising form of support for youth with current or past involvement in (or high risk for involvement in) commercial sex activity (YCSA); direct evidence of the effectiveness of mentoring for this population of young persons, however, is lacking.
2. Available research suggests that relationships established between YCSA and staff, including those with histories of commercial sex involvement themselves, can be an important component of programs to support this population of youth.

3. Structured approaches to supporting the positive development of YCSA through mentoring show promise but have not yet been adequately tested; the same is true of psychoeducational programs that aim to help YCSA build the skills necessary to foster healthy relationships, including with potential mentors.

2. What Factors Condition or Influence the Effectiveness of Mentoring for YCSA?

BACKGROUND

YCSA are far from a homogenous group. Differences within this population relating to their demographic characteristics and backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation), risk and protective factors (e.g., exposures to abuse and neglect, self-esteem, social support), and experiences in relation to commercial sex activity (e.g., duration, type of activity, age of first involvement) are well-documented. Theoretically, any of these considerations could have implications for the effectiveness of mentoring as a form of support for YCSA. Complicating matters, however, is that the consequences of any given factor could plausibly be in either direction – that is, it might either enhance or attenuate the benefits of mentoring. With respect to age, for example, a qualitative study of 11 adult female survivors of childhood sexual exploitation found that those victimized at a younger age appeared to be more vulnerable to coercion and dehumanizing forms of exploitation and in need of more intensive services.¹² It might be reasonably inferred from this type of trend that young persons with histories of victimization at earlier stages of their development are likely to be more in need of reparative relationships with healthy and caring adults and thus are in a position to gain more from mentoring supports or services. Yet, by the same token, heightened exposure to trauma at a relatively young age could tend to leave such youth less open to close emotional engagement with prospective mentors, thereby making it more difficult for the potential value of this type of support to be fully realized.

Another potential moderator of mentoring effectiveness for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity that merits consideration relates to sexual orientation and gender identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth are disproportionately affected by homelessness, with estimates ranging from 13 to 50% of homeless adolescents identifying as LGBTQ.^{28, 29} Transgender youth, in particular, report high levels of homelessness due to rejection by various groups and institutions, including family, peers, and service providers and frequently have difficulty securing adequate education and employment.³⁰ While a significant number of homeless youth engage in sex as a survival strategy, homeless LGBTQ youth in particular have increased rates of “high-risk survival strategies”, including trading sex.³¹ These youth are also more likely to trade sex in particularly risky forms, including unprotected sex with a stranger, sex with an IV-drug using stranger, and sex with a stranger after using drugs themselves.³² The heightened risk for both homelessness and survival sex make this group of youth particularly vulnerable to long-term negative health outcomes. This reality could in turn have significant implications for the consequences that follow from having or lacking access to different types or levels of mentoring support among youth with commercial sex involvement.

The manner in which these types of possibilities play out may, in turn, be dependent on the specific practices that are put in place to facilitate access of YCSA to beneficial forms of mentoring. One set of programmatic considerations that is prominent in the literature that discusses the needs of this population has to do with whether or not those in direct service roles have the requisite skills and life experiences to engage effectively with young persons who have backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity. The findings of qualitative research conducted with YCSA and other stakeholders has repeatedly pointed to a need for professional staff and other care providers to be genuine, non-judgmental, caring, and collaborative in their approach to working with youth who have current or recent involvements in commercial sex activity.^{12,14-15, 33} Appropriate training has been emphasized as a potentially important strategy for ensuring that these types of qualities are realized. Illustratively, one training curriculum (consisting of 9 3-hour sessions) was recently developed to help develop foster parents as mentors to commercially-exploited youth, one aim of which was to facilitate a nurturing and strengths-based approach to care.³⁴ Theoretically, training also could be an important vehicle for preparing mentors to assume more direct teaching or guidance roles with YCSA, as was discussed above. Likewise, given the importance that practical concerns such as education³⁵ and employment are likely to assume in facilitating positive developmental trajectories for this population of young persons, training might prove to be valuable, too, for fostering development of mentors' skills for advocacy and resource brokering.

The potential merits of training notwithstanding, available research also makes it clear that YCSA and professionals dedicated to serving this population tend to see great value in care providers having personal "lived experience" with commercial sex activity themselves.^{5,12,15,19,36} "Survivor mentoring" (as it is sometimes referred to in the literature) has been advocated, in part, based on perceptions that it can be instrumental for combating trust issues among YCSA and for instilling hope through the example of a positive role model who has overcome similar challenges (e.g.; experiences of being victimized or exploited).¹⁵ Findings have also suggested benefits associated with the experience of serving as a peer mentor. In qualitative research with adult female survivors referenced previously, for example, the value of having become involved in advocacy or service activities on behalf of others emerged as a significant theme in the narratives that were shared by the women.¹² As noted by the study author, for those who are relatively far along in their own journey of overcoming commercial sex exploitation, and exiting "the life"ⁱⁱⁱ, such experiences may help to engender a sense of meaningful self-development and, in some instances, even a viable route to a career in social services.¹²

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The available literature also directs attention to the length of time that is provided for mentoring relationships to develop as a potentially important consideration. The following findings from a study of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services programs serving minor victims of domestic sex trafficking are illustrative in this regard:

iii Though, this may incorrectly imply that entering and exiting involvement in commercial sex occurs in a linear fashion, when in reality, exit trajectories may be significantly more complex.³⁷

“Providers and law enforcement working with this population advocated for a minimum length of stay at an appropriate facility of at least 18 months. This was also echoed by survivors. While one of the existing programs reported a shorter length of stay (3 to 6 months), they operated under a flexible policy that allowed for longer stays if needed. *The 18-month length of stay was recognized as sufficient time to build trust with the girls, provide the necessary therapy to address their trauma, and to begin “working their treatment plan” and rebuilding their lives.*” (p. 4, emphasis added)¹⁵

Providers in this study also emphasized the need for ongoing connection to the program following exit and long-term aftercare services. This recommendation has been echoed in other research based, in part, on the observed vulnerability of YCSA to be prone to “relapse.”¹² Notably, challenges associated with establishing new relationships and sources of interpersonal support is one of the factors that participants in this study cited frequently as contributor to their return to involvement in commercial sex activity.¹² It is important to keep in mind that these types of considerations have been raised in the context of discussing residential (or similarly intensive) services provided by professional staff. The typical mentor (e.g., community volunteer) would have much less extensive and structured involvement with a youth who has experienced (or is at high risk for) involvement in commercial sex activity and, of course, much less (if any) professional training and experience to draw upon as well. Such considerations suggest that traditional mentoring relationships could need to be sustained over notably more extended time frames in order for positive benefits to be optimized and unintended harms to be avoided.

The factors noted thus far as potentially conditioning the effectiveness of mentoring for YCSA are all largely in alignment with available research on youth mentoring more generally. Illustratively, research that has been carried out on cross-age peer mentoring programs has indicated the potential for both younger mentees and older peer mentors to benefit,³⁸ a trend which is consistent with arguments that have been advanced in support for peer survivor mentoring for youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement. There is also a potential, however, for conditioning influences to be important that are more distinctive or unique to this population. Thus, although available research has generally failed to indicate differences in the quality of same- and cross-gender mentoring relationships,³⁹⁻⁴⁰ some considerations suggest this might not hold true for youth who have been involved in commercial sex activity. In the above referenced study of Health and Human Services programs, for example, it was noted that because domestically sex-trafficked girls have been exploited primarily by males, programs believed it was important to begin their recovery in an all-female environment and therefore recommended hiring only female staff.¹⁵ Similarly, in the earlier noted survey of agencies/organizations serving male minors at-risk for commercial sexual exploitation, the perceived need for them to benefit from a positive male influence was a salient theme.^{iv}

Prior research has also failed to find evidence of an overall trend for mentoring to be more effective when provided in conjunction with other supports or services.⁴¹⁻⁴² There is reason to be cautious,

iv The existing literature calls attention to the potential for same-gender mentoring to offer distinctive benefits for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity. It is worth noting, however, that a theoretical case also can be made for the potential value of cross-gender mentoring under various circumstances. For male youth who have been victimized primarily by men, for example, there could be advantages to beginning the recovery process with a female mentor.

however, in extrapolating this finding to youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement. There is general agreement that a range of services must be available in order to appropriately address the needs of this population of youth, including (but not necessarily limited to) basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter), intensive case management, mental health counseling/treatment, medical screening/routine care, life skills and job training programs, youth development programming, education (e.g., GED programs), and family involvement/reunification.¹⁵ The potential for benefits of mentoring to be conditional on the availability of other supports and services was suggested in a recent study of 108 girls with juvenile justice system involvement, the primary goal of which was to compare those with and without reported backgrounds of commercial sex exploitation (about one-third of the sample reported such exploitation).⁴³ The two groups were found to not differ significantly in their rate of endorsement of a one-item measure of adult social support (whether or not there was a responsible adult with whom the girl could talk to if she had a problem), with a similarly large preponderance of commercially sexually exploited girls reporting this type of support (89%) in comparison to those without histories of sex trade involvement (83%). It was noted that this could be attributable (at least in part) to the insufficiency of such support to counteract the harmful effects of childhood abuse, neglect, and mental health problems that were observed to be more common in the life histories of the girls with sex trade involvement.

To summarize, there is reason to believe that a range of factors could be important in shaping the effectiveness of mentoring for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity. Despite this possibility, our literature search revealed only two studies that reported findings with sufficient potential direct relevance to this question. The findings of these studies are reviewed briefly below.

RESEARCH

In an evaluation of outcomes for 68 girls (ages 12 to 15) participating in the Runaway Intervention Program (RIP), a strengths-based home visiting, case management, and group support program for sexually assaulted or exploited young runaway girls, researchers tested for differential change from baseline to 6- and 12-month follow-ups on outcome measures in relation to participant age as well as baseline scores on the outcome measures.⁴⁴ Age was generally found to be unrelated to change on the outcome measures. However, this study did find that girls with lower baseline scores on measures of school, family, or other adult connectedness and self-esteem, as well as those with higher reported levels of emotional distress, showed greater improvement on the corresponding measures at the 6- and 12-month follow-up assessments. These findings suggest that the program was more effective with those girls in the sample who were at highest risk.⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that the findings of such analyses are subject to potential bias associated with the “regression to the mean” effect, whereby over repeated assessments relatively high (or low) scores on a measure gravitate toward less extreme values that are closer to the sample average. Clearly, too, the scope of the program involved goes well beyond mentoring, with most components delivered by professional staff (advanced practice nurses).

Another study relevant to possible conditioning influences focused on outcomes for participants in a group home program for sexually exploited adolescent girls is known as the Acknowledge, Commit, Transform (ACT) program.⁴⁵ Upon entry to the home, residents are assigned a staff mentor, who is

a residential counselor, and shortly thereafter are also connected with a survivor mentor. Rates of successful discharge (meeting treatment goals) for 13 girls (ages 13 to 18) participating in ACT were found to be significantly higher than those observed for girls participating in other programs previously run for sexually exploited youth by the same residential treatment center.⁴⁵ It is not clear, however, whether the mentoring component differed across these programs and, as with the above study, this program involved a number of other components.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The existing literature suggests that the effects of mentoring should not be assumed to be similar across YCSA with varying personal characteristics and life experiences (for example, age, profiles of risk and protective factors, and history and current status of involvement in commercial sex activity); available research is extremely limited, however, and insufficient to provide a basis for even preliminary conclusions about these possibilities.
2. Several practices -- including a number that already appear to be in common use (e.g., use of peer survivors as mentors, coordination of mentoring with other supports and services) -- appear theoretically promising for enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring as a support strategy for YCSA; none, however, have yet benefitted from systematic investigations of their effectiveness.

3. What Intervening Processes are Most Important in Linking Mentoring to Outcomes for YCSA?

BACKGROUND

For youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity, the process of becoming fully disengaged from this type of activity and establishing a sustainable trajectory toward health and well-being often unfolds gradually and thus takes place over a significant period of time.^{12,15} Setbacks, such as “running” from supportive services and yielding to the lures posed by the prospect of re-entry into commercial sex activity, are a recurring theme in the accounts of professionals serving this population and in the narratives of “adult survivors” recounting their pathways out of this type of activity.¹² The existing literature points to changes in youth themselves as well as shifts in key aspects of their life circumstances as being potentially important in fostering positive outcomes for YCSA.

Changes in youth: One salient theme in the accounts of women who had overcome histories of involvement in commercial sex activity while young was the importance of undergoing a fundamental change in their identity.¹² These new identities, in turn, appear to have been fostered in several instances by opportunities for involvement in advocacy or service work and thus meaningful self-development. Self-efficacy beliefs, hope, and resourcefulness also all variously emerged as significant assets, particularly during the exit process itself, for certain women.¹² Theoretically, mentoring is well-suited to promote growth in all of these areas. It has been noted, for example, that mentors may foster identity development among youth in a variety of ways, such as by helping them

to cultivate new “possible selves” and by brokering access to important resources and opportunities within their communities.⁴⁶ Mentoring relationships likewise have been discussed as contexts within which youth may become better equipped to be resilient in the face of stress and adversity,⁴⁷ achieving more positive views of themselves⁴⁶ and developing stronger skills for coping.⁴⁸ Research on youth mentoring, too, provides some support for the importance of these types of intervening

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processes in pathways connecting mentoring to positive outcomes.^{46,48}

Changes in context: Existing research also points repeatedly to an important role for social and other contextual factors in processes promoting positive outcomes for those with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity.^{5,12,14,15} Available findings suggest that one significant consideration is whether such young persons are supported in accessing viable opportunities for beneficial forms of self-development and involvement in more conventional and safe forms of activity (e.g., formal education, employment). Adults who can fulfill this role within the social networks of YCSA have been referred to as providing them with “normative social capital.”^{43,49} Mentors theoretically have the potential to be important in this regard not only by serving as a source of social capital themselves, but also by linking youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement to other adults and institutions who can serve in this capacity (this type of social capital has been referred to as “linking capital”⁵⁰). Consistent with this possibility, it will be recalled that mentoring services were identified as a key strategy for engaging in male minors at-risk for commercial sexual exploitation in various forms of preventative care.¹⁴ Informed by this finding, the author of this research noted, for example, that “a mentor may act as a bridge to the formal economy, giving the child not only wanted attention, but life skills training and personal connections that will enable these young males to eventually engage in viable work” (p. 17). Research within the field of youth mentoring also supports the value of mentors assuming this type of advocacy^{21,42} or “connector”⁵¹ role in the lives of youth.

RESEARCH

Our literature search for this review failed to uncover any studies that have reported findings directly pertinent to intervening processes through which mentoring may promote positive outcomes for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The existing literature directs attention to a potential for mentoring to be of benefit to youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity by virtue of facilitating positive growth in areas such as personal identity, skills for accessing needed resources, perceptions of self-efficacy, and feelings of hopefulness; research bearing directly on these possibilities, however, is not currently available.

2. A further important way in which mentors have the potential to prove valuable in the lives of youth with involvements in commercial sex activity is to connect them to resources (e.g., persons, institutions) that can be of direct support in addressing their needs in areas such as education, employment, and self-care; the degree to which this type of pathway is important in linking mentoring to positive outcomes for YCSA, however, has not yet been systematically investigated.

4. Have Mentoring Supports and Services for YCSA Reached and Engaged Targeted Youth, Been Implemented with High Quality, and Been Adopted and Sustained?

BACKGROUND

Reach and engagement: In the previously referenced systematic review that considered research on programs seeking to address commercial sexual victimization or exploitation of young persons,²² studies were found to report only limited data on the extent to which programs had been successful in reaching and sustaining the engagement of the intended populations of young persons. Available data suggest that whereas the track record of programs with regard to initial reach and participation of targeted groups of youth is largely favorable, it has often proved challenging to sustain their engagement over time. Illustratively, in a previously referenced evaluation of a community-based, intensive case management program for 32 girls (ages 13-17) experiencing or at-risk for commercial sex involvement,²⁴ it was found that only about 1 in 5 girls completed the full 6-month program.

Rates of completion were particularly low among the older girls in the sample. The earlier noted instability that often characterizes the lives of YCSA may represent a further formidable obstacle to achieving desired levels of program involvement. Thus, even though as discussed opportunities to receive mentoring appear likely to be generally well-received by youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex involvement, there is also reason to expect them to be no less subject than other types of supports and services to situational barriers to sustained participation.

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Quality of implementation: Data on the quality with which services and supports intended for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity have been implemented are also limited.²⁴ Responses of participating youth, however, do appear to have generally been positive, thus providing an indirect indication of skillful implementation by staff. Observed challenges in this area have included high levels of staff turnover as well as those relating to programs needing to operate in “crisis mode” such that implementation of planned activities and supports is adversely affected. Similar concerns, including lack of continuity in key staff and concerns on the part of mentors with attending to more immediate perceived needs of mentees,⁵² have been observed to compromise

program implementation within the youth mentoring literature. The degree to which mentors have the requisite skills and preparation to interact with youth in the ways necessary to establish strong relationships with them and, if desired, incorporate specific types of activities and supports into these relationships is a further potentially important consideration,¹⁶ as is the previously noted potential for mentors to not complete their own agreed upon terms of service with programs.

Adoption and sustainability: Evaluations of different types of services and supports for youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity have generally not addressed questions relating to the sustainability of the programs involved.²⁴ The processes involved in facilitating program adoption by the host evaluation sites also have not been the focus of systematic investigation nor has the potential for wider-scale implementation by other organizations. As has been noted to be the case for mentoring programs, however, both adoption and sustainability of programs may be dependent to a substantial degree on the availability of adequate governmental and other sources of funding. Thus, although there are impressive examples of relatively long-standing programs that owe their origins to the passion and dedication of grassroots activists (see, e.g., [Girls Empowerment Mentoring Program](#) and [Motivating, Inspiring, Supporting and Serving Sexually Exploited Girls](#)), there is reason to expect that this may not offer a viable model for broader scale adoption and sustainability of mentoring programs to serve youth with involvements in commercial sex activity.

RESEARCH

In the previously described evaluation of a positive youth development-oriented mentoring intervention for youth impacted by domestic minor sex trafficking, it was noted that only 10 of the 22 youth who were intended to be served ended up completing the full 11-week program.²⁵ Attrition from the program was attributed to instability in the lives of participating youths, a reality that was manifest in several youth leaving the host facility before they had an opportunity to receive the benefit of the full program. In the earlier discussed evaluation of the 10 week psychoeducational intervention that included a focus on helping YCSA to build and sustain healthy relationships,²⁷ a feedback survey administered at the end of the program suggested that it was generally quite well-received by participating youth. These findings, however, were limited to 23 youth who completed the program, with the number who failed to do so not reported.

Finally, in a recent survey of 151 victim service providers in the state of Georgia, mentoring was found to be among the most common forms of in-house services provided to child victims of human trafficking.⁵³ This was not the case, however, with respect to referral services. This latter finding may be indicative of limited opportunities for engaging youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity in mentoring outside of organizations or programs that are specifically designed to serve such youth. It may also reflect lack of awareness or coordination between YCSA-serving organizations and those that have a focus on providing mentoring to a broader range of youth. In line with this possibility, a recent qualitative study identified a lack of communication among organizations as a challenge faced by advocates working against human trafficking.⁵⁴

CONCLUSIONS

1. There is reason to anticipate the viability of engaging youth with backgrounds of commercial sex involvement in mentoring supports and services, but potentially significant challenges with sustaining their participation over time due to high levels of flux and instability in their life circumstances; the limited data available are broadly consistent with this expectation.
2. Both quality of implementation and the sustainability of mentoring programs for YCSA have the potential to be significantly compromised by a range of issues relating to organizational capacity (e.g., staff turnover, funding) and mentors (e.g., skill levels, follow-through on program commitment); to date, these possibilities have not been systematically investigated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

(Mike Garringer, *MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership*)

Although there is a limited amount of research on the use of mentoring to support YCSA, there are several themes that emerge in this review that practitioners should keep in mind as they develop and implement services for this population.

IT'S GOING TO TAKE A SPECIAL KIND OF MENTOR TO SERVE YCSA MENTEES

As noted in this review, these youth face a daunting number of serious, and intermingled, risks. While traditional mentoring programs have shown some evidence (e.g., the 2013 [Role of Risk](#) study) that they can effectively serve youth with multiple high-level risk factors, YCSA can present special challenges as a result of the physical and psychological trauma they often have endured. As a result, it is perhaps more likely that effective mentoring for this group will come from organizations already working with YCSA that add mentoring to their existing suite of services than a more traditional youth mentoring program integrating these youth into their work.

This way of building on experience working with YCSA might be a good thing, because this review generates some skepticism about the ability of volunteers recruited from the general adult population being up to the challenge of mentoring young people trying to escape commercial sex activities. At the very least, such volunteers would need considerable training in the realities of commercial sex activity, the needs of their mentees, strategies for establishing trust, and how to handle the ups and downs of these youths' often unstable and transitory lives. Research noted in this review suggests that training mentors to be "genuine, non-judgmental, caring, and collaborative in their approach" would also be essential.

Unfortunately, almost all of the evaluations cited in this review involved programs where the mentors were not just average volunteers from the community, so there are still many unknowns about their effectiveness with YCSA. There are two groups of individuals who do emerge, however, in this review as perhaps more viable candidates to mentor YCSA:

1. ***Adults who have experienced commercial sex exploitation and related challenges themselves and have managed to overcome these.*** This group might be particularly well-suited to serving in this role, provided that they have built up sufficient resiliency and support systems for their own self-care. These mentors are positioned to bring a unique level of empathy and authenticity and to their relationship with a young person involved in commercial sex activity, perhaps establishing trust and understanding more easily than a mentor who lacks this shared experience. These mentors might also provide opportunities for identity development and vision of a "future self" to the mentees, while also simply representing a sign of hope that leaving "the life" is possible. But these mentors, in spite of their personal experience, would still need intensive training and supervision, ensuring that they fill the mentor role appropriately. Illustrating this understanding, the Survivor Mentorship program provided through [My Life My Choice](#) emphasizes that its mentors, in addition to being survivors of the commercial sex industry, are "leaders in the anti-human trafficking field and experts in exploitation-related trauma."

2. **Trained professionals or paraprofessionals.** Many of the programs in this review used clinicians, social workers, or other staff as their mentors. And mentoring programs serving other high-risk groups of youth have a long history of using trained graduate students or other skilled paraprofessionals in the mentoring role. Using staff in this capacity has some advantages:

- They may be more connected to other services and supports the youth could take advantage of, especially in multi-component programs
- They may be able to see the youth more frequently and intensively than a volunteer, especially in programs with a residential component
- They can perhaps offer better advice and guidance while they don't necessarily have the lived experience of a volunteer who has left "the life," they are formally trained in how to best support other human beings

Regardless of who serves in the mentoring role for YCSA, programs should determine what kind of training and post-match support their mentors will need to be effective with a youth population that can often have issues with attachment and trust, face instability and uncertainty in their housing and employment, and be wrestling with multiple other risk factors that make establishing a strong mentoring relationship difficult.

MENTORS CAN SERVE AS CONNECTORS TO OTHER SERVICES AND COMMUNITY

Mentors, especially those serving in multi-intervention or multi-component YCSA programs, might be particularly effective in connecting youth to other services and supports (including those offered outside of the program). While the mentoring they provide might foster cognitive, social-emotional, and identity development in the youth, their most valuable role might be in serving as the "glue" that helps the youth stay engaged with other services and supports. This "intermediary" role can help youth tackle their multiple needs and provide emotional and instrumental support that helps these youth "stick with it." In fact, this review notes that the lure of commercial sex activity is strong and that many of these youth have a hard time participating fully in programs and are greatly at risk of returning to old behaviors and previously unhealthy relationships. A mentor who can act as a bridge to, and facilitator of, multiple forms of support, might play a critical role in helping YCSA from sliding back or not taking full advantage of the support available.

The other key role mentors can play is as facilitators of community engagement. Several of the programs in this review offered some form of activity that allowed these often marginalized youth to engage in their community in positive ways and contribute to the greater good. One can imagine that for youth who may have felt very much on the fringes of society that the opportunity to engage with others in prosocial activities and service projects that benefit the community might feel rather welcome and could help reframe their identity and feelings of self-worth.

NOT ALL YCSA MAY BE READY TO BENEFIT FROM A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

As noted previously, these youth are dealing with many challenges and difficult circumstances. They may need considerable clinical support before they are in a position to form a strong, positive relationship with a mentor. Even when they find value in the mentoring they receive, there is a strong possibility of these youth leaving care prematurely or coming in and out of the mentoring relationships as they struggle to break free of commercial sex and related activities.

This can be challenging for the types of small organizations that often serve YCSA. They may have limited slots in their program and it can be disheartening to have widespread attrition and lost opportunities for maximizing the program's impact. And as the review notes, it can also be frustrating to be operating in a state of "chaos" as the program tries to manage the coming and going of youth who drop in and out of services, often suddenly, and suffer additional traumas as they get drawn back into risky behaviors. Programs may want to assess a youth's readiness and level of comfort around having a mentoring relationship before offering that form of support. Or they may wish to offer extensive training and preparation for mentees before they assign a mentor. This may help reduce the fluctuation in matches and increase the number of youth who benefit from a mentor and fully complete program services.

PATIENCE IS THE KEY TO MENTORING YCSA

Perhaps the overarching theme of this review is that this is difficult, but necessary, work. These youth desperately need caring adults who can help them build resilience, see their lives in a new light, and take advantage of other forms of help. But we also know that this will take time and have many ups and downs. Practitioners may want to help these mentoring relationships succeed by being patient about progress and by:

- **Planning for longer-term matches** – It's unlikely that a mentors can fully gain trust, bond with, and become meaningful figures to YCSA in a short period of time (although we don't have evidence directly to that effect), so programs may want to aim for a structure that allows for longer and deeper mentoring. A mentor that can stick with the youth through all the ups and downs can be a powerful ally.
- **Providing relationship flexibility** – Programs may want to allow matches to take a "pause" when youth float in and out of services in the wake of life uncertainty and upheaval. Knowing that a mentor is there waiting for them when they are ready can make another attempt at leaving commercial sex activity feel less daunting.
- **Providing post-match follow-up** – Even when programs offer limited-duration mentoring, they can extend the impact of that mentoring by providing periodic follow-up and ongoing engagement with youth participants. Program effects may wash away over time without some efforts to keep in contact with program "graduates." This is one area where partnerships with other service providers may come in handy as the program tries to stay connected to those they have served.

Given the limited research on mentoring this population, we encourage both public and private funders to support evaluation of the role that mentoring supports and services can have in benefiting YCSA. With the benefit of such support, organizations and programs serving youth with backgrounds of involvement in commercial sex activity are positioned to make a pivotal contribution to growing the knowledge base in this area. The insights gained through this type of data gathering and research will be essential for better replicating and expanding effective forms of mentoring for these youth.

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